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## National identity, culture and globalisation

*Lithuania wakes up to a new social and cultural reality*

In the academic and intellectual Lithuanian debate, globalisation and Europeanisation is often regarded as a deadly threat to the national culture, an "evil mission".  
Almantas Samalavicius looks at the arguments and proposes a completely different concept of identity.

The impact of globalising cultural trends on variety of national cultures has become one of the burning issues of the day. These days globalisation is often seen as a hegemonic discourse enveloping and affecting all possible cultural forms and its elements all over the world, both in post-modern and traditional societies. Post-Soviet Lithuania, like many other countries that shifted from a close to an open society is now being subject to global forces operating in the contemporary world no longer divided and dismembered by competing political and economic systems and their militant ideologies – the two opposite poles that demarcated former "East" and "West" that shaped the post World War II era until the spectacular and truly epochal events of the 1990's. Researchers into present global pressures and interactions mostly agree that it is no longer possible to neglect or ignore the most essential processes of globalisation operating in the world linked to the vast extensions of market relations, economic, political and cultural interactions and cycles of production and reproduction shaped under the completely new conditions of capitalism and new world order: expansion and multiplication of gigantic world-wide business structures, multinational corporations, transnational communication and media channels, entertainment industries and the like. There are more and more speculations about the end of history, end of ideology, end of geography – concepts that came into being even before the notion of globalisation took over the vocabularies of academic research, politics, economy, culture and even popular journalism. Globalisation has become a both catchy and powerful term. In many local settings the meaning of such terms as globality, globalisation, globalising, etc., are treated from different perspectives, depending on how local societies and cultures feel and identify themselves in the shifting world-systems, how the changes in center-periphery relations have influenced their own images of themselves and what were their past experiences in regard to external powers and relationship to larger nation-states.

Obviously the Lithuanian society is not "tax-exempt" from the pressures of globalisation. It is a tiny country as far as its geography is concerned, though it has shrunk to these dimensions from a ten-times larger Medieval kingdom. It is burdened by the many cases of historical turbulence that befell on it during the last centuries, when it was forced to give up its statehood to foreign powers, and burdened by traumatic experiences gained during the Soviet

occupation/colonisation that lasted almost half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So it is naturally cautious of the pitfalls of globalising trends that threaten the fragile and ambivalent content of its national culture. It is no wonder that questions of national identity during recent years have been articulated openly and heatedly, occasionally even desperately in academic and public discourses. It might be added though, that rapid expansion of globalisation and penetration of global forces into local societies and their markets inflicts feelings of insecurity, fear and disillusion in many regions of the world. Anti-globalist movements and their actions taken in many places of the world (the events of Genoa and Gothenburg are perhaps the most radical) have not the only responses to world-wide globalisation, but can be rightly considered also the very products and side-effects of its processes. Anti-globalist movements encompassing all of the globe seem to resemble the desperate activities of Luddites during the ascent of the industrial revolution. Distrust toward neo-liberal doctrines that seem to be most powerful ideological tools and prime-movers of free market, and the conduct of transnational companies and corporations today, becomes stronger as these operating forces threaten to destroy national economies and sovereignties.

It is true that expansion of globalising factors gives rise to well-grounded discontent. It should also be added that most European countries were shaped as national states during the 19th century, and thus appeals to some forms of supra-national or denationalised states made by the heartiest advocates of globalisation sound more like old utopias of the industrial age than reality that might soon come into being. Moreover, pessimistic critics of globalisation are inclined to interpret globalizing processes as social dystopias of the very near future. No wonder that gloomy pictures of the future mature in such a climate of contradictions and reasonable worries.

There is more or less articulated distrust toward globalisation in Lithuanian social and cultural discourses as well, and in many cases, for good reasons. The sceptical views of globalisation are not difficult to understand or explain. Having in mind that after half-century's enforced relationship with the "Big Brother", i.e. the Soviet Union and all the ill-effects this period of foreign oppression had upon Lithuanian society and its culture, it is not easy for the country to accommodate itself in new geo-political setting. The unification of Europe in which Lithuania now takes part is in fact, much awaited, though not an easily manageable project. It demands many changes in the local social structure. The networks of international and supra-national market forces, financial institutions and business corporations that take over local bodies are sometimes seen as almost invisible, but extremely powerful institutions offering new forms of dependence, inflicting unified recipes of development, even those projects and practices that have compromised themselves in other continents and for different reasons. It should be further added that Lithuanian society itself is undergoing a social transition; accordingly many layers of its social strata feel insecure since some of its social groups have neither economic nor intellectual means to tune to the new rhythm of social life of this "brave new world". Unemployment, lack of social security programs, and limited re-educational and career opportunities are felt very painfully in this stage of post-communist transition. Many Lithuanian social critics admit that disillusionment in the ruling elite (no matter if left or right wing parties have been in power), lack of trust in state institutions (such as the parliament, government, courts and law enforcement – well-documented by many opinion polls during the last decade) readily gives itself up to mass fobias and social hysterias. It is also obvious and noted on many occasions by researchers and critics that these development have been accompanied by the waning of

communal bonds and communal spirit that were so strong during the upheaval of 1990 when the country won back its national independence. Contemporary social discourse in this country more often than not speaks more of differences than common denominators: citizens are opposed to the power of the state, employed versus unemployed; the rural population in opposition to urban; nationalists with cosmopolitans; etc. Even the somewhat shaky results of the Euro-referendum in which Lithuania finally greeted the European Union might be interpreted in many ways. Perhaps there are good reasons to suggest that many Lithuanian citizens voted for Europe not because of a newly-born feeling of pan-European community and solidarity, but because of fear of remaining on the periphery of this new supra-national economic and political body. And also the fear of remaining too close (physically and mentally) to its closest neighbour Russia, which still articulates imperial rhetoric and is getting back to the old political discourse of the Soviet period, often exhibiting signs of instability and militant political claims as far as its former territory is concerned. On the other hand, many citizens, who exhibit a sense of being deprived of social security during the post-Soviet period, maintain fears to remain entrapped in the swamp of transitory economy, moreover so that their present poverty was largely a result of unjust privatisation that swept the country immediately after the collapse of Soviet regime. Thus it is no wonder that under the influence of hard collective memories and stigmatic experiences public consciousness today espouses almost apocalyptic visions of culture's future. Such mentality is peculiar not only to the mass consciousness but also to the habits of thinking of intellectuals and academics, who often articulate almost the same apocalyptic viewpoints as marginalised social groups do. Catastrophist Spenglerian concepts of a waning national culture often persist not only in public criticism but also in theoretical discourses. Some recent Lithuanian academic conferences and seminars on the issues of globalisation and national culture exhibit in their rhetoric and formation of questions an attitude that reminds one of seances of exorcism, during which "incantations" are made to extract the disastrous and demoralising influences of the Western world. A rather characteristic example of such apocalyptic discourse on national culture and identity is a collection of papers from an academic conference aimed at discussion of globalisation's impact upon contemporary Lithuanian society. An excerpt from one of the keynote speeches in this forum is a vivid demonstration of such an attitude:

A Lithuanian, who under Soviet occupation by all means attempted to preserve his identity, consciously or subconsciously stuck to those symbols and historical-cultural memory that could be classified as the spirit of agrarian epoch. For him ethno-culture was a way of self-defence. But it was mercilessly crushed not only by bolshevism and Russification, but also by historically inevitable, rather rapid and shameful urbanisation and industrialisation enforced with methods alien to a Lithuanian. Post-war guerilla resistance and hundreds of thousands of deportations and imprisonment almost destroyed the genetic elite of the Lithuanian nation. This, plus the rapid growth of the cities and industry that drew thousands of energetic country dwellers dug grave to Lithuanian culture and ethno-culture cherished by the agrarian epoch. [...] We all, however, are now witnessing in various forms an echo of post-industrial, post-modern society entering from the Western world, especially from the USA. But every torrential trend – and post-modernism is one kind – brings waste and sediments on its surface. In the condition of a weak culture and

a national, moral resistance in shambles, these sediments gets caught and remain, performing their evil mission. Poisonous sediments enter all cells of society (nation): politics, economy, professional art, family and especially the hearts of children and teenagers who are not protected from historical cultural and other onslaughts.<sup>1</sup>

The text cited above at first sight might be considered as a hasty utterance of any marginalised, hysterical social group, shouting out its phobias and discontent. One should not be mistaken, though, because this statement was made by a person who ranks as a member of the Lithuanian academic power elite: university professor, member of the Academy of Sciences, former chairman of Lithuania's sociological society, recipient of the annual national scientific award, etc. Besides it was made not at a fuzzy Hyde-park type of gathering but at a conference of a national scale. Moreover, this opinion might be taken as reflecting a much wider set of opinions, expressed by a larger number of academic and public critics. But let us for a moment consider what seems to be oversimplified and unconvincing as social diagnosis in these remarks? Firstly, the author presents rather inadequate images of dilemmas that Lithuanian people encountered during the Soviet period, insisting that all society *in corpore* resisted Russification and Sovietisation. In fact, there is an abundance of literary testimonies and memories indicating that loss of national consciousness, dignity, moral indifference, national and social solidarity were already showing their signs during the period of oppression. In fact, it was an outcome of Soviet-style "internationalisation" imposed upon subjugated societies. On the other hand, social psychologists and anthropologists who have researched colonised/oppressed societies have provided substantial evidence indicating that there always co-exist several versions of identity building or re-building. For example, Aland Roland in his seminal book on Indian and Japanese identities presents at least three identity types applicable to colonised India: one of complete identification with the oppressor, another a complete denial of anything English or European, a withdrawal to nativism, and thirdly, a mixed type in which both elements merged.<sup>2</sup> He goes on further to say that these are theoretical models of identity, while in reality there were many more versions of self-identification. We should also bear in mind the fact that elements of traditional culture that had long before lost their relevance to a society or a community are usually revived under conditions of foreign domination as conscious opposition to the enforced power and prescribed alien way of life. This means that what is termed ethnic culture is ideologically re-constructed according to the program of resistance, which more often than not is offered by the intellectuals of a subjugated nation. A renown Algerian psychiatrist and one of the leaders of resistance against the French colonisation in the post-WW II period, has anthropologically demonstrated how the veil – a traditional women's headwear, which by that time had already lost all relevance and become an archaic cultural element – was once again made important during the French colonisation.<sup>3</sup>

Ethnic culture as a form of resistance, as it is formulated in the quote above, demands closer scrutiny. It is true that extensive urbanisation and industrialisation was imposed upon Lithuanian society by the Soviet power and these processes were crucial in destroying traditional forms of rural life. It is also true that despite the expansion of modernising trends during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the country's society was still largely rural. It should be added, though, that archaic and traditional forms of culture during the Soviet era were preserved not by local rural communities exclusively; much in this sphere had been achieved due to the activities of intellectual communities (e.g.

the Ramuva community) that originated in Lithuania's capital city. The revival of the folk dance and song movement was a truly conscious and purposive form of cultural resistance initiated by academics and the intelligentsia. However, immediately after the great social upheaval of 1990 this movement started to fade away rapidly. The experience of the post-Soviet Lithuania's independence confirms the insight that traditional cultural elements, folk customs, traditions and the like are as a rule much more important during the periods of dependence, when they become a source of national pride, mythology and tradition, sustaining a core national identity (threatened to be erased by foreign power structures), but they lose their previous importance in new political and social setting. One would also find it difficult to agree with the exaggerated statement that it is the flow of mass culture that destroys collective identity and ethnic culture, because some forms of mass culture, though with slightly different content, flourished in Soviet society as well as in the Western world. Contemporary critics of mass culture hardly imagine society a monolithic entity. Perceptive sociologists like Herbert J. Gans<sup>4</sup> have long ago shown that society is made up of what he termed "groups of taste", and hardly any researcher today would insist on dividing all culture into two rigid cultural poles: an elite and a mass one. However, appeals to the mystic "genetic elite" of the nation sound utterly strange and can only reinvoke comparisons with categories found in Fascist or resistance discourse. It is obvious that what is being offered, instead of sound critical inquiry into culture, is just a moralising discourse that does not help us to understand the identity changes of a transitory post-communist society facing globalisation.

Another question should be raised: is identity fixed, rigid and stable or rather a constantly changing phenomenon in need of constant revisions? While it would be my dictum to claim that it is impossible to show that identity can be preserved in some "original" form of being, it is obvious that like everything in culture and social life it is apt to reshape itself through time. Thus any attempt to treat identity as "pure" or fixed phenomenon might in the end turn out to be a kind of paranoid activity or mania, as is suggested by Thomas Mayer. Mayer claims that

The search for identity becomes a mania for identity only in cases where identity projects itself as one and the same in every realm of action, without maintaining a distance from the roles of the individual, without empathy for the diverse roles and identities of the other, without the will and the ability to withstand ambivalence. Identity mania seeks nothing but identity, the very same in all-life contexts and for all the others at that".<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps there is a certain difference between considering identity a fixed phenomenon and turning of a search for identity into a mania, however, there are good reasons to suggest that the attempts to re-consider Lithuanian identity through the lenses of old cultural ideology that was shaped in the nationalistic intellectual climate of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – without considering the complexity of the present world – are nothing but reactionary. Instead of becoming a useful tool in reconsidering new shapes of national and cultural identity, such a standpoint becomes an iron cage that locks us in an eternal past, which, by the way, was once socially constructed as well. A project of purifying Lithuanian national identity in order to counter-balance the influence of globalisation has no further prospects, because the only way mapped by such an activity is a retreat to the past and this kind of project will only be successful on one condition: that the totalitarian society with all

mechanisms of control is restored. And this is hardly an appealing prospect for the future.

A different kind of perspective is offered by those Lithuanian philosophers and cultural critics who see Euro-integration and openness to the world as a timely possibility and inducement to reconstruct national identity. They claim that traditional Lithuanian identity has already been lost and leaves no hope to be restored as a rigid legacy resistant to change. These insights are as a rule based on recent sociological data and opinion polls, the results of which allow these critics to conclude that the present understanding of a fix Lithuanian identity is stale, and it does not stimulate any questions about oneself and in relation to the actual community. Thus, it is believed that a strong challenge is needed in order to make an ideational space for creating or re-creating one's new national self-identification. Some critics suggest that the European Union might become such a prospective space for helping to understand what makes us be and feel Lithuanian and in what ways we differ from other contemporary nations.

However, I would take a slightly different stand. It would be an oversimplification or even a gross mistake to conclude that present-day Lithuanians have lost their feeling of their national identity. First, one cannot rely on opinion polls exclusively, especially when these polls are designed to specifically target the younger generations. And perhaps it is more important to note that in a transitory society such polls or questionnaires often reflect short-lived emotions: stress and disillusionment in social and political reality, lack of self-assurance and dignity, etc., that are typical to societies labelled as post-communist or post-colonial. Even the claims that there are no strong external challenges can provide any proof of the extinction of national identity; they could be treated as pointing out the possible threats that a collective identity might encounter in a near future. These social conditions of a post-communist realm might be taken as making manifestations of national identity more obscure, and the feelings of communal bond perhaps less strong than they were during the days of dependence or the national resurgence movement. Taking into consideration the insightful though occasionally debated concept of national identity offered by Anthony D. Smith, one could conclude that there are much more profound ways for identifying national embodiment. According to Smith, features of national identity are: historical territory or homeland, common myths and historical memories, common mass culture, common legal rights and obligations, common economy with territorial mobility of its members.<sup>6</sup> If we apply these categories on the presumed present problem of identity, further elaboration on the subject hardly brings us to a conclusion that Lithuanian identity suffers an epochal crisis. Perhaps, to the contrary. The fact that the feelings of national identity and pride about one's national belonging ceased to be of the utmost importance on the day's agenda indicate other things. Most probably Lithuanian society has entered into another stage of its post-communist development, abandoning the ideology of national culture and identity so important before 1990 and shortly afterwards when many of its constituent groups fell back into old cultural mythology and espoused rhetoric of a tribe. Of course when the borderline between dependence and independence turns more and more into a past experience, society undergoes significant changes and leaves many of its former myths and dreams behind. These days many things that existed in the past, occasionally seem almost nostalgic: the feelings of unity, of common sufferings, of experiences endured, as well as of communal bond – all seem to have become looser and less important. Collective memories about the past have also become less persistent, and, most probably are becoming less

stigmatic and painful. All these are both good and bad things in themselves; it is rather difficult to draw the straight line between what has been lost and what has been or is being gained. It is obvious, however, that what we are witnessing today is a new social and cultural reality to which we still have to adapt and adjust, and at the same time meet the real challenges posed by globalisation. One of the most urgent challenges that the post–communist Lithuanian society faces today is the need to revising and restructuring its national identity under the influences of Europeanisation and globalisation. This task can be completed more or less successfully, but it depends on which path toward understanding identity one chooses: either a narrow and outdated view of identity as a fixed and rigid entity that can and should not change; or, as Zygmunt Bauman has suggested, treating identity not as inherited or acquired but as "never–ending, always incomplete, unfinished and open activity in which we all, by necessity or by choice are engaged."<sup>7</sup> The first path can only take us back to a kind of cultural "preserve" in which there is room for old and rigid notions only, and which hardly fits into the present complex transnational realities and exchange. I see this approach as nothing more than a utopian project which has no place in the contemporary world. Meanwhile, a flexible approach toward individual and collective (first and foremost) national identity has the power to open new vistas for placing oneself in rapidly changing social and cultural surroundings and escaping the prison of a homogenised world–vision enforced by mindless globalisation and stiff nationalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Romualdas Grigas, "Lietuviai nudienos pasaulio akivaizdoje: isbandymu kaina", in: *Lietuvių tauta ir pasaulis*, vol.I, Kaunas, 2000, p.33–34.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Roland, *In Search of Self in India and Japan: Toward a Cross–cultural Psychology*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989, p.22.

<sup>3</sup> See, Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, transl. Hakoone Chevalier, New York: Grove Press, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> See, Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, New York: Basic Books, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Meyer, *Identity and Mania: Fundamentalism and Politization of Cultural Differences*, New York: Zed Books, 2001, p.17.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991, p.14.

<sup>7</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualised Society*, Cambridge: Polity, 2001, p.152.

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